

T H E  
Circular LETTER.



ELDERS and MESSENGERS  
OF THE SEVERAL  
BAPTIST CHURCHES

MEETING AT

Aulcoter, Bengeworth, Bourton, Tewkesbury,  
Upton, Worcester, and Warwick,

(Having received Letters also from *Birmingham, Bromsgrove,  
Brittle-lane, Dudley, Hooknorton, Leominster, Middleton,  
and Pershore*) being met in

ASSOCIATION at CIRENCESTER,

May the 25th and 26th, 1779,

Holding the Doctrines of Three equal Persons in the Union  
of the glorious Godhead; Eternal and personal Election;  
Original Sin; Particular Redemption; Free Justification  
by the Righteousness of Christ imputed; Efficacious  
Grace in Regeneration, and the final Perseverance of the  
Saints;

To the Churches they respectively represent, send  
Christian Salutation.

DEAR BRETHREN!

LIKE the chosen tribes of old, we have gone from  
strength to strength, and have been permitted to ap-  
pear before God in Sion.

Through divine goodness we have attended the solemn-  
ties of another annual Assembly; we have read and con-  
sidered the contents of the several letters from the respective  
churches connected with this Association; and while we  
cannot but lament the little success that has apparently at-  
tended

tended the preaching of the gospel, within the circle of our connections, we rejoice that the churches are in peace and harmony, and stately enjoy the means of grace.

We lament the loss that the world and the church sustain, by the sudden and unexpected removal of our much esteemed and respectable friend and brother, the Reverend Dr. Ash; and while we sympathize with the church that has lost so worthy and amiable a pastor, we congratulate another, over whom God, in his wise providence, hath lately placed \* one. May God in his infinite mercy continue a succession of pastors after his own heart, and may every destitute candlestick be supplied with a burning and shining light.

With singular pleasure we address another annual epistle unto you, in order to stir up your pure minds by way of remembrance: You have had line upon line, precept upon precept, one epistle after another, for a long series of years, which we hope have been seriously and candidly attended to, and this we presume will not be judged unnecessary or superfluous.

Every method that is taken to disseminate divine knowledge, to promote the best interest of moral and intelligent beings, and advance the Redeemer's kingdom, must meet with the most cordial approbation of all that are truly serious, and susceptible of the noble and refined pleasures of genuine religion. Whatever imperfections may attend the peculiar modes adopted by us to obtain these important ends, will doubtless be generously overlooked by persons of true candor and unaffected piety.

We write not from the base motive of self applause, or private interest; we require not your attention to matters of mere speculation, abstruse theories, or party peculiarities; but to the grand, important, and interesting truths of the christian religion. Our ambition is to be instrumental in enlightening your minds, invigorating your graces, and regulating the outward deportment. To effectuate these noble purposes, in a steady dependance upon a superior agency, we pray, study, and preach, according to the different intellectual abilities which divine providence hath furnished us with. Without assuming any authority over your consciences, or attempting to infringe upon your natural and unalienable rights, we represent plainly and

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\* *Mr.* Our brother Stephens, lately ordained to the pastoral office over the church of Christ at Upton upon Severn,

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faithfully to you the glorious truths of the christian œconomy, according to our views of them. We defend their authenticity, display their peculiar excellencies, and point out their practical tendency ; we reason and expostulate with you, time after time, concerning the dignity and value of your immortal souls, the reality and importance of religion, and the necessity of a moral change, as a previous qualification for the enjoyment of heaven and happiness. We address ourselves to you as men ; we consider you as subjects of a rational address ; tho' at the same time we are fully convinced of the absolute necessity of supernatural influence, to render our preaching and your hearing advantageous. We make our appeal to the heart, to the understanding, to the conscience. Our motives are derived from the mercies of God, the compassion of the Savior, and the reasonableness and utility of religion itself. Motives these so suitable and excellent, that one should think would operate powerfully upon all ingenuous minds. But what are the consequences with respect to you ? Are you wiser, more humble, more holy, and more circumspect ? Is the Redeemer more precious in your estimation ? Are his commandments your delight, and his glory your end and aim ? We wish you to be eminent and judicious Christians, to see you exemplify the power and reality of religion in your lives and conversations, that by displaying the several virtues and graces that compose the christian character, you may eminently appear to be trees of righteousness, richly laden with the genuine fruits of the divine spirit : That by these shining evidences others may be convinced that religion is not a science of mere speculation ; that it does not consist in mere form or profession, but that it is a glorious reality ; and from such a conviction be constrained to glorify your Father who is in heaven. We write no new commandment unto you, nor wish to encumber you with needless ceremonies, or pharisaical austerities : You are only reminded of your Lord and Master's exhortation, " Let your light shine before men." As christians, you are lights in the moral world, and are required in your different spheres to hold forth the word of life, to display its divine lustre in a dark world, and diffuse its brightness through the circle of your connections. Reflect seriously and frequently upon the solemn profession you have made of religion. Have you not distinguished yourselves from others ? You have not only in common with others assumed the honourable appellation of *Christian*, but have



have publickly professed an attachment to Christ, the great founder of the christian religion. Have you not been convinced that religion is an important reality? Have you not perceived its intrinsic beauty and excellence? And have you not found it to be a rich source of divine consolation? If so, you need not be told that a florid profession of religion does not of itself constitute the christian character. But such is the deceitfulness of the human heart, that professors of christianity need frequently to be reminded of this, that a profession of religion, and the possession of it, are things widely different; and 'tis no uncommon thing to see the former without any connexion with the latter. It is truly melancholy to think how many deceive themselves in this particular. Alas! what signifieth the venerable name of *Christian*, without the temper and disposition of Christ? What is the form of Godliness without the power; the mere shadow without the substance; the appearance without the reality? We are travelling to a world of *realities*, where *outward appendages* and *decent ceremonies* will be of very little consequence. Men may, indeed, satisfy themselves with the mere form of religion, and please themselves with pomp and pageantry for a while, but when they come to find themselves in the near views of death, and the prospect of an awful eternity is before them, they will need something more substantial to support them in that critical hour.

The importance of genuine religion appears in a striking light, when viewed in its connexion with the eternal world of spirits. If we have nothing more than the external garb of religion, that, like Elijah's mantle, will fall off in the passage betwixt the two worlds, it will drop with the body, but will not rise with it. None will be permitted to appear in disguise before the divine throne. Reflect upon the melancholy circumstances in which the foolish virgins found themselves, when their professional lamps went out, and at a time when they stood most in need of them. There are such damps in the deep and gloomy valley of the shadow of death, as will extinguish every lamp that has not the oil of divine grace to supply it. Grace in the heart will then appear to be the principal thing, however inattentive we may be concerning it now. This consideration renders the advice of St. John peculiarly seasonable and important, "Look to yourselves;" attend with diligence and impartiality to the duty of self-examination; a duty this of great importance,  
but



but perhaps too much neglected by professors of religion in the present day.

The state of the mind is an object that should engage our serious attention ; we should be solicitous to know whether our several graces are duly exercised on their proper objects. Let us then arise and trim our lamps, be active and zealous for God and religion, shake off sloth and self-indulgence ; time is short, much is to be done, concerns of the greatest moment solicit our attention, and a final period will soon be put to all opportunities of an earthly nature ; the judge standeth at the door ready to give the signal of his appearance ; hear his majestic voice ! He announces his solemn approach, " Behold I come quickly !" The most awful scenes will ere long be unfolded ; death, judgment, and eternity are before us ; the great judge his radiant throne will soon ascend, and the books will be opened ; the books in which our respective characters are registered : Of what importance then is it that we, as individuals, put some such questions as these to ourselves : Am I prepared to meet my sovereign lord and judge ? Is this judge my Savior ? Has he chosen me, and have I chosen him ? Am I interested in his righteousness and atonement ? Is my heart purified by the influences of the divine spirit ? Am I actuated by the noble and evangelical principles of the Gospel ? Am I in such a situation as I would wish to be found in the concluding period of life ? Can I, in answer to the Redeemer's declaration, " I come quickly," say, " Even so come, lord Jesus ? Can I say this sincerely and cheerfully ? These are serious, interesting questions.

Consider the nature of the privileges you enjoy ; they are numerous and important ; too numerous, and too important to be passed over in silence, or buried in forgetfulness : Yes, the principles of honor, gratitude, religion, forbid it. You enjoy privileges that many of your respectable ancestors lamented the want of.

Take a retrospective view of past ages, when these lands of ours were overspread with the awful gloom of popish superstition and cruelty ; when it was considered as a crime of a very heinous nature for men to exercise those intellectual faculties in search of truth and righteousness, which the great author of their beings gave them for that very purpose ; when interested and designing men took upon themselves the government of conscience, affirmed without proof, and required belief without conviction, and that upon pain of the heaviest penalties.

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At the time of the reformation, the triumphs of ecclesiastical tyranny and violence were checked, tho' religious liberty, after all, stood but upon a very narrow basis. This, indeed, is easily accounted for; the venerable reformers themselves were but just emerged from the very depth of popish darkness and superstition; protestantism was then in its very infancy, and the principles of liberty were not sufficiently considered, or properly investigated; tho' it must be acknowledged, that the reformation was an excellent work, so far as it went, and that very great things were done, all circumstances considered. We have great reason to bless God that such an event took place, as it was an introduction to still greater things.

At the period of the ever memorable revolution, tyranny and arbitrary power were again very happily checked; religious liberty received the royal patronage, was taken under the protection of the throne, the act of toleration was passed, and both civil and religious liberty secured by law, under that patron of liberty and law, king William the Third, whose name will always appear with peculiar brightness in the British annals, so long as the love of liberty and religion shall prevail among us.

Tho' many attempts have been since made to eradicate religious liberty, yet blessed be God, they have been rendered abortive. The principles of liberty are better understood than ever, and we now behold worthy prelates, and some of the most respectable characters in the established church, standing forth publicly in defence of them. To their honor be it mentioned, for your comfort be it known. The embarrassing conditions upon which the privileges of the toleration were long suspended, are now happily removed, so far as they related to a subscription to human articles of faith.

You have, dear Brethren, the gospel of Christ in your hands, and liberty of conscience, to read, think, and act for yourselves; you can publicly attend your respective places of divine worship, and perform your various devotional exercises without fear of interruption, either from the irreligious and openly profane, or cruel, intolerant, persecuting bigots: Privileges, these, that demand the warmest gratitude; privileges that should be highly prized, and suitably improved.

We wish you to study well the principles upon which your conduct is formed. Too many act from no settled principles.

principles at all ; but is such a conduct rational or commendable ? We presume no sensible person will take upon him to vindicate it. It is almost unpardonable in protestant dissenters to be ignorant of their principles, especially in such an age as the present, in which the subject of liberty has been so thoroughly discussed, and so many excellent treatises written in defence of it. Avail yourselves, then, of the best information in your power. Without studying the nature of your religious principles, you will be but ill qualified to comply with the apostle's request ; " Be ready always to give a reason of the hope that is in you." But alas ! how many are there incapable of doing this, thro' their own negligence and inattention ; and perhaps we shall find these very persons exceedingly zealous and bigotted. This indeed is accounted for without any great difficulty, ignorance being the source of bigotry and superstition.

Need we remind you that the grand and fundamental principles of protestantism and nonconformity are, the right of private judgment, liberty of conscience, the sufficiency of scripture, and an acknowledgment of the supreme authority of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is constituted the head of the church, and is the sole legislator in it. We are to call no man master upon earth in religious matters, one being our master, even Christ.

The great Redeemer is so jealous of his honor, and so careful to maintain his own royal prerogative, and secure the privileges of his people, that he has taken care to guard against an arrogant invasion of them, by establishing it as a perpetual law in his kingdom, or church, that no one that is called by his name shall claim a legislative authority in it. " Be not ye called Rabbi." To have conscience in subjection to the authority of weak fallible men, is an intolerable bondage indeed. It argues great pride and arrogance in frail men to attempt to frame laws that are designed to bind the conscience. Were we to ask such by what authority they set up such a claim, surely they could not have the effrontery to say that they derive it from Christ. It is the prerogative of Christ only to rule the consciences of men ; and this must be attended to by all that would wish to have right conceptions of the nature of moral and christian liberty.

Endeavour then thoroughly to digest the good old principles of the Revolution : They are noble, manly, rational, and scriptural : They will bear the most critical examination, and will stand every objection that the advocates  
for



for despotism and intolerance may exhibit against them. One would think that they only require to be understood, in order to gain the most cordial approbation. Indeed we see the more they are known, the better they are approved of. Permit us then to address the charge to you that Moses, on another occasion, delivered to the children of Israel, "Teach them diligently to thy children, and talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, when thou liest down, and when thou risest up."

Having carefully examined, thoroughly digested, and cordially approved of the principles of genuine protestantism, let it be your study and ambition to act consistently with them. Avoid every thing in your conduct that is incompatible with those noble and rational principles. When we behold in some that would be thought zealous friends to the cause of protestantism, zeal without knowledge, arrogance and censoriousness, what a blemish this to their character? While you maintain your own right of private judgment and free enquiry, you cannot reasonably wish to abridge others of these privileges, who have an equal claim to them with yourselves. Let your moderation then be known unto all men; but don't suffer your moderation to degenerate into indifference. Surely we may discover a spirit of genuine candor, in connexion with the firmest attachment to our own principles. We may certainly be zealous for the truth, as it is in Jesus, without being ill-natured or censorious. We are to speak the truth boldly, and not shun or conceal our religious principles, in order to conciliate the esteem of men. This is a mean and contemptible conduct, and can never gain the approbation of wise and judicious persons; but then we are required to speak the truth in love. We are to contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints; but this contention must be regulated by the spirit of the gospel; not carried on by invective, or reproachful terms. A bad cause may indeed require invective and reproach to support it, but will any christian say that the cause of Christ does? We hope better things; hope that all christians understand the nature of religion too well, to suggest any thing like it.

Let it be your concern, to cultivate brotherly love and christian friendship; remember that love is an essential criterion of discipleship to Christ; it is essential to the very being of a christian. A person may possess many very shining talents, have an extensive acquaintance with men and things,

things, discover great zeal for religion, and talk with angelic eloquence upon the sublime doctrines of the gospel ; but, if he has no love, he has no true religion ; he can have none, for religion cannot exist without love ; and however high such a person may stand in his own opinion, or in the opinion of others, he is nothing in the sight of a holy and righteous God. Where there is true love to Christ, it will be evinced by obedience to his commands ; and this is his command, "that we love one another." So important is this duty, that Christ calls it his new commandment ; it is called new, because more clearly explained under the gospel dispensation, and enforced with new motives and arguments, and with a new example, even the bright and illustrious example of the Son of God himself. While we profess to depend upon the perfect righteousness and complete atonement of Christ, in the great article of divine acceptance, we are laid under the strongest obligations to copy his excellent example : I have, says he to his disciples, given you an example. And St. Peter tells us, that Christ left us an example, that we should follow his steps. And O ! what a shining example did the Redeemer set his followers with respect to the exercise of love ! In him we behold the most pure, disinterested love and benevolence, and displayed in the most striking manner imaginable.

Let us seriously reflect upon the astonishing displays of the Savior's love to men ; to sinful and rebellious men ; let us contemplate him in his original dignity and pre-existent glory, bearing the form of God, dwelling in the bosom of the Father, and adored by all the orders of angelic nature ; let us consider him in the fullness of time, stooping from his radiant throne, and taking upon him the humble form of a servant ; let us reflect upon the various circumstances of his incarnation ; let us trace him through the various scenes of human life, and attend him to mount Calvary ; there behold him nailed to the accursed tree, groaning, bleeding, dying ; and all these awful circumstances were the effects of the Redeemer's love to sinners. Let us pause awhile :—That he who was the brightness of the Father's glory, that he who possessed every divine perfection, that this infinitely glorious being should become incarnate, obey, suffer, and die, to make reconciliation for our sins, this was love truly divine, and great beyond conception ; this is the wonder of angels, and the song of saints. St. Paul, after employing much study upon the subject, and writing copiously upon it, pronounces concerning it, that it passeth

passeth knowledge. What an argument then is this for love among christians ! Our love is not to be confined within the narrow limits of a party, but extended to all that bear the image of Christ, of whatever denomination. Put on charity, says the apostle ; let it be worn as an upper garment, and be the most obvious piece of your cloathing. Guard against anger, wrath, malice, &c. consider how contrary these are to the genius of the gospel ; be kind, tender hearted and forgiving ; let those that are in proper circumstances instruct the ignorant, feed the hungry, cloath the naked, comfort the feeble minded, sympathize with the afflicted, judge for the fatherless, and plead the widow's cause ; bear ye one anothers burdens. Ye are brethren, watch over each other in love ; pray with and for one another ; converse frequently together upon the great things of the kingdom ; let your speech be with grace seasoned with salt ; and let it be your grand concern to demonstrate, by a regular and uniform deportment in life, that you belong to Jesus. Remember, that to be a real christian is to be like Christ ; it is a conformity to his image ; we should therefore set Christ always before us as our pattern, and be vigorously pressing towards this mark. Consider the many virtues and graces that adorned the Redeemer's character ; how lovely and amiable the whole of his deportment ! — Would to God that all who profess the christian religion were in their measure like unto their head. Let it be the height of your ambition, dear brethren, to be like unto Christ ; by this mean you will demonstrate the reality of your connection with him, which is the most honourable and advantageous connexion that can be formed ; you will adorn your profession, recommend religion, advance the Redeemer's glory, and put to silence the ignorance of foolish men.

We have great reason to lament, on account of the present melancholy situation of our public affairs. We seem to be in very critical and awful circumstances indeed ; the most affecting and distressing scenes lie before us. Would to God we were but more suitably affected with these calamitous circumstances ! Let us trace every evil to its proper source : Sin is the procuring cause of every calamity. Let us attend to the exhortation of the prophet ; and try our ways, and turn unto the Lord. It is a great happiness to have a God to turn unto. The Lord still reigneth ; this is the good man's consolation. The Lord sitteth between  
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the cherubims, tho' the earth be moved; and whatever events take place here below, it will certainly be well with the righteous; therefore let the children of Sion be joyful in their king; and say Alleluia! for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.

And now, Brethren, we commend you to the Lord, and to the word of his grace; and may it be our happiness to be training up, under the divine influence, for the noble and exalted services of the throne above, that when our earthly connexions are dissolved, and a final period put to these social meetings here below, we may be admitted to join the General Assembly and Church of the First-born, whose names are written in heaven, and participate that happiness which is to be enjoyed at God's right hand, for ever and ever.

Signed, (on Behalf of the whole Assembly) by the  
Moderator,

WILLIAM DORE,

## B R E V I A T E S.

**TUESDAY** evening, according to appointment, the Ministers and Messengers met together, and after some time spent in prayer, Brother DORE was chosen Moderator; the letters from the several churches were read, and their contents considered. The melancholy state of public affairs was taken notice of in several letters, and days of fasting and prayer recommended, as highly necessary at the present alarming crisis. This opportunity was closed by prayer.

The next morning, at six o'clock, we met again, and after spending some time in prayer, the Moderator produced the Circular Letter, which was then read, and the meeting closed by prayer.

At

At half after ten, the public service was introduced by singing and prayer, by Brother WILKINS; Brother L. BUTTERWORTH preached from 2 Cor. iii. 18. "But we all with open face beholding, as in a glass, the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the spirit of the Lord." Brother B. FRANCIS prayed: Brother POYNTING preached from Rev. i. 5, 6. "Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever." Brother HILLER concluded by prayer. Meeting again in the evening, half after six, Brother SKINNER prayed: Brother STEPHENS preached from Luke xiii. 29. "And they shall come from the east, and from the west, and from the north, and from the south, and shall sit down in the kingdom of God;" and closed the solemnities of the Association by prayer.

#### The Present STATE of the CHURCHES.

Added this Year.		Lost by	
Baptized	38	Death	27
Received by Letter	5	Exclusion	2
		Dismissal	1
	43		30
Total Increase		13.	

As our friends at Cirencester have been at a very considerable expence in enlarging their place of worship, and to defray which are obliged to solicit the assistance of their charitable and well disposed friends, we unanimously recommend their case as highly worthy of encouragement.

The next Association to be at Worcester, Tuesday and Wednesday in the Whitsun-Week. Brother BEDDOME and Brother DORE to preach; in case of failure, Brother THOMAS. — Put up at the UNICORN.

T H E E N D.

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